

General Management Plan Newsletter 1 June 1999

Dear Grand Portage Friends:

Grand Portage National Monument is beginning a planning process to guide park operations, management, and interpretation. The planning will be extensive and provide fundamental direction to the Monument. With your ideas and help we will be able to fashion together a plan that will guide park operations for the next 10-20 years and identify studies and further actions to protect park resources. For now, the national monument will continue to operate much as it always has. However, significant changes are possible in the long term if so devised by this plan.

As friends and neighbors, you can assist the staff of Grand Portage National Monument and the planning team by telling us your concerns about resource preservation, your ideas about what the national monument should look like in the future, how it should be managed, and what interpretive "stories" we should be telling. The first significant step in devising this plan is hearing from you and gathering together your suggestions, ideas, and questions.

The national monument will be hosting three public meetings to hear from you and others. The meetings will be held June 8 at the Grand Marais Community Center from 7:00-10:00 p.m., June 9 at the Grand Portage Lodge from 7:00-10:00 p.m., and June 10 at the Minnesota Historical Center in St. Paul from 1:30-4:00 p.m. We look forward to hearing from you either at one of the meetings or by letter, e-mail, or phone call. These meetings are not presentations made by the National Park Service but a forum for soliciting your ideas. Because the planning is just beginning, no alternatives have been developed or decisions reached about the national monument's future. So this is a particularly good time to contribute your thoughts.

Further opportunity for you to comment will occur following development of a draft plan. That plan will incorporate the best ideas from the public into the alternatives developed by the national monument staff and the planning team. It will be available to the public both in written form and on the internet and will be sent to all groups or individuals on the national monument mailing list as well as federal and state agencies, interested national organizations, and selected libraries.

The National Park Service has the once in a generation opportunity and challenge to set a course for the future of Grand Portage National Monument. We look forward to your thoughts and ideas, and to your continuing involvement in keeping this historic site a part of our community and nation. Please join us.

Tim Cochrane
Superintendent

Description of the Park

Grand Portage National Monument, on the western shore of Lake Superior, lies just south of the U.S.-Canada border. The park entrance is from U.S. 61, 36 miles north of Grand Marais, Minnesota. The portage bisects the reservation of the Grand Portage Band of Chippewa (Ojibwa) Indians, who in 1958 donated about half of the land that became the national monument. The other half was purchased from individuals.

The national monument tells a complicated story of voyageurs and the quest for furs, late 18th-early 19th century mercantile practices, and the western exploration of the continent. A reconstructed stockade area presents a view of life at Grand Portage in the late 1700s with exhibits, audio-visual, and interpretive programs. Within the stockade are a reconstructed kitchen and Great Hall where the majority of interpretation is focused. Outside the stockade is a reconstructed canoe warehouse where additional interpretation occurs. The stockade is open from mid-May to mid-October. A rebuilt dock occupies the location of the original one used by the North West Company's small lake ships.

The entire nine-mile historic portage for which the site is named is open year-round to visitors and ends at the site of Fort Charlotte, a smaller North West Company storage depot. No visible remains of Fort Charlotte exist.

The national monument also explains the relationship of the Chippewa (Ojibwa) people to the fur trade and the site, providing an outlet for traditional crafts demonstrations and interpretation.

A trail up Mount Rose ascends 300 feet above the stockade providing a panoramic view of Grand Portage Bay and the reconstructed structures and stockade. From various points along the trail the visitor can marvel at the geography that made the portage necessary.

Short Site History

The beginning of Native American use of Grand Portage is shrouded by the passage of time. However, we do know by the time of the first appearance of European-Americans at Grand Portage, the trail had been used by the Native American residents for sometime.

A water network linked Montreal, capital city of the Great Lakes fur trade, with northwestern Canada. Where streams were unnavigable, canoe men carried boats and cargo over a "portage" or trail. Christened by French explorers and missionaries sometime after 1722, Grand Portage, the "Great Carrying Place," bypassed rapids on the lower Pigeon River and was the acknowledged thoroughway to Canada's prime fur country. In 1784 it became the headquarters of the North West Company. To transport the furs collected through trade with Native Americans farther west, the company hired a backwoods navy of voyageurs. The company's post was a convenient meeting place for the voyageurs, which evolved into two groups based on geography; the north men, or "winterers," and the "Montreal men." Late in July brigades of north men set out from Grand Portage for trading posts in the Canadian north. Trade goods bought furs from the Native Americans who had come to desire the trappings of European civilization. Ultimately, the furs would be fashioned into elegant felt top hats to grace the heads of the European and American upper classes.

Through the harsh winter, the north men lived among and depended upon the Native Americans, trading out of their lonely posts. With the breakup of the ice, about mid-May, they returned to the Grand Portage. Meanwhile, the Montreal men propelled their craft up the Ottawa River, then westward across the Great Lakes. Two months later they joined their counterparts for the annual “rendezvous.” At this company-sponsored event the north men exchanged furs for trade goods and supplies furnished by the Montreal men, partners struck deals, and Europeans and Indians alike engaged in raucous entertainment.

Afterwards the north men headed back into the backcountry once more, and Montreal men paddled canoe loads of furs back east. The Grand Portage trading cycle continued until 1803, when the company moved upshore to Fort William. By 1821, the portage had fallen into a place of sporadic local trade, not the “hub” it was in its golden days. Throughout this time of changing fur trade locations, local Bands of Ojibwe remained in their traditional areas of summer and winter residence, including the village of Grand Portage. As the fur trade lost momentum toward the mid-19th century—fashion changed and beaver populations diminished—hard-working, rambunctious voyageurs found their profession obsolete. However, the Grand Portage Band of Ojibwe coalesced into the village we see today.

What the General Management Plan will Do

The general management plan will take a long-range look at the site’s cultural and natural resources, opportunities for interpretation and visitor use, development, operations, opportunities for partnerships, and other issues that are identified by the public or park staff. The plan will define the goals and purpose of the site, and it will help determine management direction for at least the next 10-20 years.

Although a complete list of possible issues and concerns awaits the completion of public meetings, several questions that may be addressed by the general management plan follow (listed in no particular order):

- Where should the monument headquarters be—Grand Portage or Grand Marais?
- Where should maintenance facilities be?
- How can we best integrate the Grand Portage Band concerns with those of the national monument?
- How can we foster the historical character of the place?
- What visitor facilities and visitor services are needed?
- How should monument operations be tied to the Isle Royale ferry operations?
- How should the site’s maritime history be explained?
- How is the best way to handle accessibility issues?
- Should we consider reconstruction of missing historic structures and/or landscape?
- Could “partnering” with other tourism entities benefit the national monument?
- What are the best means of preserving the cultural and natural values of the national monument?
- Should there be park housing?
- What research is needed to better manage cultural and natural resources?
- What are appropriate visitor uses of the national monument?
- What should we be interpreting to visitors?